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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 550th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 5 October 2000, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. KHORRAM

CONTENTS

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE UNHCR STAFF COUNCIL

REPORT ON THE PRE-EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION OF UNHCR's ANNUAL PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR 2001 (continued)

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT

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GE.00-03228 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE STAFF COUNCIL

1. Mr. N. HUSSAIN (UNHCR Staff Council), paying tribute to Ms. Ogata, said that the staff of UNHCR had a keen interest in the succession and believed that continued strong leadership would be critical to the organization. Staff would have liked their views to be taken more into account in the selection process.

2. The brutal murders of four colleagues were still fresh in everyone's minds. Thousands of humanitarian workers around the world had recently taken part in a day of protest marches in order to send a message that, if they were to go on saving lives, their own must be better protected. Staff were deeply committed to serving the needy, but did not want to be killed in doing so.

3. Aid personnel were impatient for action by the international community and the leadership of the United Nations to improve their security. The primary responsibility lay squarely with States: member States that had not already done so should sign and ratify the 1994 Convention on the Safety and Security of United Nations and Associated Personnel; member States should also support the adoption of an additional protocol to include all humanitarian workers; and the Statute of the International Criminal Court, which classified attacks on humanitarian personnel as a war crime, also urgently required ratification.

4. Legal instruments were not in themselves a guarantee, however. Host Governments must introduce more effective security measures, particularly in remote locations, where staff members' lives were often at risk. Lastly, funding for staff security must be increased. The resources currently available in no way matched the needs.

5. The United Nations, too, must show greater commitment to the security of both international and local staff. First, it must adopt a firmer position towards States that failed to meet their obligation to protect staff. Second, a clear threshold of risk must be established, beyond which staff would not be put at risk, whatever the external pressures. Lastly, flaws in the internal management of staff safety must be urgently addressed. The lessons of Atambua and Macenta must be learned and acted on.

6. In the area of human resources management, the first challenge was to speed up the new postings process, which had proved very cumbersome. Over 200 advertised posts were still unfilled, yet 150 colleagues were still waiting for posts. Such delays had a negative impact on UNHCR operations and created anxiety among staff members and their families. The current joint Staff-Management Review of the postings process should implement recommendations as soon as possible.

7. The Review should also reinforce the Appointments and Postings Board (APB), which had been reduced to a procedural review body with no authority to advise the High Commissioner or to take positive action on the filling of posts. An empowered APB was

essential, not only for operational reasons, but also to build staff confidence in the posting process. It could also help ensure the implementation of policies such as geographical and gender balance, for which no mechanisms yet existed.

8. A related problem was the absence of appraisal reports for more than 50 per cent of staff members globally, in the context of the Career Management System (CMS). Since performance was the basis of posting and promotion, that was a matter for urgent attention by senior management.

9. With regard to the forthcoming review of the rotation system, the Staff Council believed that any new mechanism to move staff between duty stations should be based on certain principles. First, UNHCR should aim for a strong presence in places where it could have the greatest impact. Second, all international staff should serve in the more comfortable as well as the tougher locations during their careers, not only as a matter of fairness, but also as part of the process of broadening their experience. It was also important that staff should not fear that they would be "forgotten" or that their career prospects might be jeopardized by accepting postings to more remote workplaces. Third, the new system must be flexible enough to accommodate personal and family considerations. Lastly, if staff were to spend part of their careers in the field, UNHCR must show a clear commitment to enhancing security and working and living conditions.

10. In view of the importance of such issues for UNHCR operations, he proposed that human resources management questions should be regularly discussed at Standing Committee meetings.

11. In general, a healthy and constructive dialogue between staff and decision-makers was essential in an organization that relied heavily on the morale and motivation of staff who made enormous sacrifices in order to bring its mandate to life. At present, however, there was a certain imbalance in that dialogue, with management views too often prevailing over those of staff. Staff also believed that human resource issues required closer attention from senior management. The Staff Council was confident that the will was there; what was needed was action in order to give personnel issues the priority they deserved.

12. Mr. I. HUSSAIN (Pakistan) said that the staff's unwavering commitment was indeed the key to the success of UNHCR's mission and he shared the staff's frustration and anguish at the recent tragic events and the increase in violent attacks. The security issue was high on member States' agenda and they would do their utmost to strengthen protection and safety. A number of delegations were concerned at the inadequate funding requirement for meeting security needs.

13. The other staff issues that had been raised all deserved attention and he urged UNHCR's senior management to address those concerns properly during the coming year.

REPORT ON THE PRE-EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

14. Mr. SCHENKENBERG van MIEROP (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) said that nearly 200 NGOs had taken part in the Pre-Executive Committee consultations. There had been an exchange of views on PARINAC, which was felt to be an important collaborative

process and should be strengthened. Regional focal points had called for increased resources for communications and regional meetings, while UNHCR and NGOs had called on PARINAC to address protection issues and review its structures to increase effectiveness.

15. NGOs looked forward to taking part in the planned Global Consultations on international protection. NGOs had become increasingly involved in protection and were working closely with UNHCR in the Reach Out process. The discussion on protection had covered, inter alia, interdiction and access to asylum procedures; internally displaced persons; UNHCR's relations with regional bodies; and the need for UNHCR field offices to be more supportive of NGO work in the area of protection.

16. With regard to the role of private companies, some NGOs had agreed that work needed to be contracted out, while others had stressed the value added by NGO operations. Suggestions had also been made on how the military could contribute to humanitarian operations, although NGOs had expressed reservations about that role. There had seemed to be a consensus that the military was most useful in providing a secure environment for humanitarian operations.

17. It had been noted that UNHCR-NGO cooperation and coordination needed to be improved with regard to safety in the field. A short-term task force of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group had been set up to develop a framework agreement on security in the field.

18. Lastly, he said that NGOs had expressed concern at the budget cuts imposed by UNHCR on its implementing partners. While acknowledging UNHCR's structural underfunding, he said cuts so late in the year had a particularly adverse impact on programmes.

CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION OF UNHCR's ANNUAL PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR 2001 (agenda item 6) (continued) (A/AC.96/932 and Corr.1 and 2 and Add.1)

19. Mr. MUKALAY (Democratic Republic of Congo) said that, while he recognized that the budget would not allow UNHCR to deal with every refugee problem and that donors had certain demands, he would like to see greater flexibility in prioritization. In the Great Lakes region, for example, there were still major problems, with people fleeing from conflict and resources not always available.

20. Donors sometimes allocated funds to particular regions without being aware of actual needs on the ground. He called on them to show more generosity to Africa and particularly to the "hot spots" where conflict raged and needs were increasingly urgent.

21. Mr. THEVENAZ (Switzerland) asked whether the budget for 2001 aimed to cover the needs arising from UNHCR's core mandate or the needs UNHCR estimated that donors were prepared to finance. He also wondered what the impact of the budget cuts would be on field operations and at headquarters.

22. Donor States would like humanitarian actors to coordinate their work precisely and cooperate fully so as to make every contribution count. Switzerland also believed in coordination among donors and suggested that the evaluations, which were useful management tools, could be made jointly by several donor States.

23. He noted that the operational reserve had been increased for 2001, and that would help UNHCR in its commendable efforts to increase surge capacities.

24. He expressed appreciation for the High Commissioner's commitment to tap the energy, flexibility and creativity that existed within UNHCR. That implied an optimal use of human resources in order to bring talent, energy and vision to the fore.

25. Mr. HOREKENS (Director, Division of Communication and Information), replying to the question raised by the representative of Switzerland, said that the budget reflected both the needs identified by UNHCR in fulfilment of its basic mandate and the amount that could be covered by donors and was, of course, subject to consultations with donors. All the comments on the new-style budget, gender issues, evaluation and research had been noted and would be actively followed up in future programmes.

26. With reference to some of the specific questions raised during the debate, he said that he saw prioritization not as a budget-cutting exercise, but as an exercise in identifying core priorities within the overall strategic planning review. On the question of security, an inventory was being made of all security items and costs and measures to ensure staff safety and security in refugee camps were being reviewed. He would like to see security identified as an operational sector in the budget, rather than as part of administrative support. Security would also be on the agenda when stock was taken of the unified budget in the forthcoming year.

27. He welcomed the proposal for further consultations on funding the unified budget. The secretariat was working on expanding the donor base, not only to include more Governments, but also to seek out non-traditional donors from the private and corporate sector. Although that sector did not as yet provide much in the way of predictable income, he expected that, within five years, it would provide a significant portion of UNHCR's income. He acknowledged the contribution of States which were not cash donors, but which contributed significantly to refugee work by making material resources available. He would like to see those important contributions highlighted in future budgets. He thanked the representative of France for the contribution of FF 3 million announced for Guinea, as well as for undertaking to solicit greater support from the European Commission for UNHCR programmes in general. The comments on prioritization by the representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo would be taken into account in the review to be carried out with donor States. Lastly, he called on all donors to announce high levels of pledges at the forthcoming pledging conference in New York and thanked the representative of the United States of America for taking the lead in making such an announcement in advance of the conference.

28. The CHAIRMAN drew the Executive Committee's attention to the draft decision on administrative, financial and programme matters, which had been the subject of an intensive process of consultation with all member delegations under the chairmanship of the Rapporteur. He also drew attention to table 1.3 contained in document A/AC.96/932/Corr.2, which showed

that the revised total budget for 2000 amounted to $942,346,200, of which $824,741,000 was for the annual programme budget for 2000, and that the total proposed budget for 2001 amounted to $898,527,700, of which $872,403,100 was for the annual programme budget for 2001. If there was agreement on the revised annual budget for 2000 and the proposed budget for 2001, he would take it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft decision.

29. It was so decided.

REPORTS RELATING TO PROGRAMME OVERSIGHT (agenda item 7) (A/AC.96/931, 933 and Add.1, 934, 935 and 943)

30. The CHAIRMAN said that a detailed discussion of the documentation relating to audit and oversight matters had already been held at the 19th meeting of the Standing Committee and had been summarized in the report of that meeting (A/AC.96/943). The discussion had also been reflected in the Decision on Administrative, Financial and Programme Matters.

31. Mr. MORRIS (Inspector General, Inspection and Evaluation Service), introducing the report on UNHCR's inspection activities (A/AC.96/934), said that work had begun on the internal inquiries ordered by the High Commissioner into the killings of UNHCR staff in Indonesia and Guinea. The focus of the inquiries would be on the actions and responses of UNHCR. Although the inquiries had led to the postponement of some planned inspections, the possibility of fielding two inspection teams now that the High Commissioner had agreed that inspections of smaller operations could be led by the Senior Inspection Officer would allow a limited increase in the number of inspections and more attention to post-inspection follow-up.

32. Lessons could be drawn from the observations common to many inspections. For example, there was a need to provide greater support to staff in the deep field and for action to ensure that posts in the front line were filled promptly with experienced staff. The implications of the changing composition of UNHCR field teams, which now included United Nations Volunteers, project staff and secondees from non-governmental organizations, and the new challenges faced by national colleagues, some of whom continued to work when insecurity had forced international staff to withdraw, had been considered at a meeting of the Senior Management Committee in August 2000. Management had identified a need for field managers to do more to make all members feel part of the team, as well as a need for better coordination and information exchange among the different units, both within offices and between field and country offices. At the same time, the Inspection and Evaluation Service had a strong support and advice function and tried to identify best practices, of which there were many good examples, and to disseminate them.

33. With regard to the Service's investigative responsibilities, UNHCR faced particular problems in ensuring the integrity of the refugee status determination and resettlement process. Other subjects requiring investigation were less specific to UNHCR's responsibilities. UNHCR's investigative capacity was limited, although it received good support from the Investigations Section of the Office of Internal Oversight Services and others. He expected the forthcoming Joint Inspection Unit report on investigation capacities in the United Nations system to suggest ways to increase and improve those capacities.

34. The creation of an inspection function in UNHCR, which had been a personal initiative of Ms. Ogata's, was a significant investment, adding up to about US$ 1 million a year, but he was convinced that the investment was essential for an organization with such a diverse field presence.

35. Mr. CRISP (Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit), introducing the report on UNHCR's evaluation activities (A/AC.96/935), said that the Unit's capacity had increased significantly since its creation a year earlier. Progress had been made in implementing the four basic principles of transparency, consultation, independence and relevance, in introducing new evaluation methodologies and in cooperating with other agencies, Governments and non-governmental organizations. However, there was still a need to strengthen the capacity of the Unit, to mainstream evaluation in the work of UNHCR as a whole, to establish the Unit's work programme more systematically and incorporate its findings in the programme- and policy-making processes and to involve Governments and non-governmental organizations directly in the evaluation function.

36. He suggested four practical steps the Unit could take to enhance the effectiveness and accountability of UNHCR: reconvene the informal consultations on evaluation; prepare a plan of action for the evaluation function drawing extensively on the report by the independent consultancy; involve member States, non-governmental organizations and refugees themselves in evaluation activities - members of the Executive Committee, for instance, could make experts available to the evaluation teams and send representatives to the evaluation workshops it was planned to hold; and learn from the past experience of member States in developing effective evaluation policies and procedures.

37. Ms. RAATIKAINEN (Finland) said that the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit had taken many steps in the right direction. She welcomed the initiative to use outside expertise for developing its evaluation function and agreed with many of the conclusions and recommendations in the study. Two of its findings, however, were a cause of special concern. According to the report, the resources of the Unit were inadequate to provide a basic minimum level of accountability: a commitment to rectify that key problem should be reflected in the budget. Also according to the study, the impact and value of evaluations remained limited. It was pointless to conduct expensive evaluations if the results did not feed into the planning and programme and policy development of UNHCR. UNHCR staff would be better able to understand the evaluation function if they were involved in the evaluations.

38. She supported the idea of reconvening the informal consultations on the evaluation function and the other ideas presented by Mr. Crisp on the practical steps the Unit would be taking.

The meeting rose at 4.15 p.m.